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# 2020 WAS A BOOSTER SHOT AGAINST HUMAN HUBRIS

(By George Will)

The plague year 2020 was yet another brutal rejoinder to the belief that brute forces can be pushed to the margins of, and eventually out of, humanity's experience. When today's pandemic recedes, what should linger is a quickened appreciation of the fragility of life and social arrangements. And an awareness that things much worse than covid-19 have happened before, and will continue to happen. The human story is not entirely the about human choices.

The 1918-19 "Spanish flu," which began in Kansas, killed between 50 million and 100 million people worldwide, lowered U.S. life expectancy by 12 years, and did not spare, as covid-19 largely does, the young. The Black Death—the bubonic plague—of 1346-1353 was much worse, killing 10 percent of the world's population, and more than one-third of Europe's, including 40,000 of London's 70,000 residents.

In the 1980s, AIDS was so shocking because it refuted the complacent belief that infectious disease epidemics had been banished. In 2019, however, 1.7 million people were newly infected with the AIDS virus, and 690,000 people who were already infected died. But of the 38 million living with the virus, 25.4 million were controlling it with antiviral drugs.

Astronomy lowered mankind's self-esteem (we are not the center of the universe), then biology did (our species has an undistinguished pedigree). Geology, too, has disturbed our sense of mastery. Genesis enjoins us to "subdue" the Earth, but this slowly cooling residue of the Big Bang gets a vote. As its continents wander—half an inch to four inches a year, according to plate tectonics—the planet's interior of boiling gas and molten rock occasionally is heard from.

Volcanic eruptions at what is now Yellowstone National Park some 630,000 years ago covered half of what is now the continental United States with ash. When the Indonesian volcano Krakatoa erupted in 1883, sea surges, which killed most of the eruption's eventual 36,000 victims, were felt in the English Channel. Krakatoa, was, however, only one-tenth as powerful as the April 1815 eruption of Indonesia's Mount Tambora, which killed 10,000 instantly—incandescent ash flowed 100 miles per hour—and generated winds that uprooted trees. Particulate matter blocking the sun's rays cooled the Earth: Water froze in some American cisterns on July 4. Today, a large majority of the one-eighth of the nation's population that lives in California resides near the San Andreas fault, and the question is not if but when it will lurch catastrophically.

A U.S. satellite poised between Earth and the sun can provide perhaps a 45-minute warning if the sun is going to plunge the planet into darkness. On Sept. 2, 1859, before there were light bulbs, a coronal mass ejection (CME) of 100 million tons of charged particles thrown off by the sun only produced spectacular sunsets. If—actually, when—it happens again, it can produce chaos in our thoroughly electrified, digitized world by induced electric currents: no functioning satellites, telephonic communications, water pumps, financial transactions, hospitals. No Netflix. That got your attention.

On March 13, 1989, a CME solar storm turned out the lights in the entire Canadian province of Quebec. Three days earlier, a NASA astronomer says, scientists had noticed "a powerful explosion on the sun. Within minutes, tangled magnetic forces on the sun had released a billion-ton cloud of gas. It was like the energy of thousands of nuclear

bombs exploding at the same time. The storm cloud rushed out from the sun, straight towards Earth, at 1 million miles an hour." This geomagnetic storm struck the Earth the evening of March 12, creating "electrical currents in the ground beneath much of North America," crashing Quebec's power grid.

There are those who believe in a benevolent God because Earth, as they see it, is "biophilic," meaning friendly to life. They must, however, reckon not only with non-biophilic things (saber-toothed tigers, volcanoes, typhoons, viruses, etc.), but also with the fact that this (meaning: everything) is not going to end well. The universe will either continue to expand, ending in life-extinguishing cold, or will collapse into incinerating heat.

Meanwhile, here is some (sort of) good news, from the Economist. In history's bloodiest century, the last one, 100 million to 200 million people died as a result of war. Measles killed in the same range, influenza near the top of the range. Smallpox, however, killed 300 million to 500 million.

The eradication of smallpox, by globally coordinated vaccination campaigns, "stands as one of the all-time-great humanitarian triumphs."

Human choices cannot subdue all the brute forces that always lurk. Choices can, however, make a difference. And they can dignify us, a thinking, coping species.

## NOMINATION OF ANTONY JOHN BLINKEN

Mrs. FEINSTEIN. Madam President, I rise to speak in support of Tony Blinken's nomination to be Secretary of State.

I support Tony for Secretary of State for three key reasons. First, he has the diplomatic skills that our country needs at this pivotal moment to regain our leadership on the world stage. From 2015 to 2017, he served as Deputy Secretary of State, the Nation's second highest ranking diplomat. In that position, he helped lead U.S. efforts to combat terrorism, address rising concerns in Asia, and respond to Russian regional aggression. He is a crisis-tested leader who will hit the ground running at the State Department with critical knowledge and relationships with leaders worldwide.

Second, Tony has a longstanding and trusted personal relationship with President Biden that will enable him to advise the President on key foreign policy issues. During President Obama's first term in office, he was National Security Advisor to then-Vice President Biden. Previously, Tony served as the Democratic staff director for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for 6 years when then-Senator Biden was committee chairman. It is because of his relationship with President Biden and his career as a public servant that Tony understands that the job of Secretary of State is not just to serve the American people, but to help improve the lives of people struggling all over the world.

Last but certainly not least, Tony has the experience of serving at the State Department that will help him rebuild the Department, recruiting needed Foreign Service Officers and ci-

vilians, ensuring State personnel have the training they need to be effective in their mission, restoring morale throughout the Department, and empowering our diplomats to speak on behalf of him and President Biden.

Tony will help our country repair the damage of the last 4 years and restore the United States as a leader and trusted ally. I look forward to working with him to advance our mutual objectives of promoting peace and security, and I urge my colleagues to vote in favor of his confirmation.

Thank you.

## CONFIRMATION OF LLOYD JAMES AUSTIN

Mr. VAN HOLLEN. Madam President, I was proud to vote in support of Lloyd Austin to serve as our next Secretary of Defense. I cast my vote with confidence that he will capably lead the Department of Defense through this difficult period in our Nation's history.

As a four-star general, Lloyd Austin was tasked with leading the drawdown of American troops from Iraq and helped bring 150,000 U.S. soldiers home. He demonstrated the logistical mastery that will be necessary to help lead the nationwide effort to vaccinate against COVID-19. Through his remarkable life and trailblazing career, he has gained the experience and perspective required of this office, and now, he has broken one more barrier as the first African-American Secretary of Defense in our Nation's history. I am confident he will ensure that our Armed Forces reflect and respect the diversity of our Nation and that everyone in our military upholds the oath they take to protect our Constitution.

I have made no secret of my concerns about the troubling trend of Congress granting waivers to allow recently retired officers to serve as Secretary of Defense, and I voted against such a waiver for Lloyd Austin as I did when that question was previously put before the Congress. Nevertheless, I believe once Congress speaks on the issue of a waiver, each Senator must evaluate the nominee on his or her merits alone. By that measure, Lloyd Austin is superbly qualified. He has the confidence of the President and is the right person for this moment. I support his confirmation.

## ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS

### REMEMBERING BARBARA HARDCASTLE

• Mr. BOOZMAN. Madman President, I rise today to honor the life of Mrs. Barbara Hardcastle, who passed away on January 13, 2020, at the age of 94.

Mrs. Hardcastle was trailblazer and a fierce advocate for her community and her State. A native of Fort Smith, AK, she also made her mark in politics and government in California. I was honored to know her, and so I join her friends and family in grieving her loss.

Barbara Turner was born in Fort Smith on April 6, 1927. She graduated from Fort Smith High School in 1944 and went on to earn a bachelor's degree from Fort Smith Junior College. She